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THE RELATION OF PESSIMISM TO ULTIMATE PHILOSOPHY.

THE object of this paper will be to show that logically Pessimism should be taken in a far wider and more fundamental sense than is commonly assigned to it, and that when this is done, it forms an attitude towards the ultimate questions of philosophy which is not susceptible of being resolved into any other, and cannot be refuted, but only accepted or rejected.

In attempting to establish this view, it will be convenient to start by determining what we are to understand by the term Pessimism. It has been customary to subordinate the treatment of the subject too much to the particular views of representative pessimist writers, and to pay too little regard to the logical connection of the pessimist positions. Hence, a belief has become current that Pessimism might be summed up in the assertion that life was not worth living, because in it the pains predominated over the pleasures, and the whole question was thus rendered one of the possibility and result of the hedonistic calculus. Now, it is true that the doctrines of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann lend themselves to such a narrowing of the issue, but I believe that it is possible to demonstrate the essential shallowness and logical inadequacy of a transition which is psychologically so easy as to have been made almost universally.

In the argument that life is not worth living because it involves an excess of pain, the second clause states a reason for the first, and, if it is proved, the conclusion inevitably follows. What has not been observed, however, is that even if it should *not* be proved, the conclusion may yet be true, because it may rest on other reasons. To argue that because one ground for a conclusion is unsound, the conclusion itself cannot be established, would evidently be nothing else than the familiar logical fallacy of denying the antecedent—until it has been shown that no other grounds are possible. But this is not

the case here. The condemnation of life, which Pessimism essays to pronounce, does not necessarily rest on a single basis: it forms an attitude of thought which has been linked with the assertion of the predominance of pain only by an accident of historical development. It is quite possible to condemn life on various grounds without holding it to be predominantly painful. It is possible to condemn it, not because it has too little pleasure, but because it has too little of the other ends which are recognized as good in themselves, because it has too little virtue or knowledge or beauty or duration. Life may shock us into a denial of its value also by its moral, its æsthetic, its intellectual deficiencies: it may seem so brief, so nauseatingly petty and contemptible that the game is not worth the candle. In all such cases the Pessimism cuts itself adrift from its supposed hedonist basis, and, even where the hedonist standard is retained, it need not be of an egoistic character. It may be sympathy with the misery of others that tempts us like the Buddha, like the Preacher in Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night," to condemn life. Again, it is possible to argue, more subtly, that the unhappiness is the effect rather than the cause of the worthlessness of life. It is "not that life is valueless because it is unhappy, but that it is unhappy because it is valueless." But what enables man thus to apply to life the standards by which it is condemned? Nothing surely but the fact that he is capable of framing an ideal of worth, an ideal of something worth striving for and of holding it up to reality as a mirror in which to behold its deficiencies. It is because we form ideal standards which alone bestow true value upon life, that we can condemn it because it nowhere allows us to attain perfect happiness or full knowledge or complete goodness or æsthetic harmony.

Now, it is evident that the deficiencies in life which the formation of those ideals enables us to detect will act as a potent stimulus to progress so long as the deficiencies seem comparatively small and the ideals appear attainable; if, however, we allow our ideals to outgrow our means of reaching them, the chasm between them and the actual will become

too deep to be bridged by hope ; we shall despair of attaining our heart's desire and bitterly condemn the inadequacy of the actual. Thus Pessimism will ever hover like a dark cloud over the path of progress, ready to oppress with gloom alike the cowardice that despairs and the temerity that outstrips, prematurely and recklessly, the limitations of the practicable. It is a natural and almost inevitable phase in spiritual development, which results whenever any object of desire is found to be unattainable, and it has no exclusive affinity for the details of a pettifogging calculation of probable pleasures and pains. The sole reason why the question of Pessimism has mostly been debated on a hedonistic basis is because Happiness is the one ideal which is universally comprehended, which allures by its elusive glitter even the coarsest and most commonplace of men.

Having thus freed Pessimism from its entanglement in hedonistic disputes, we may proceed to determine its deepest nature. That nature would seem to consist in the denial of the *value* of life, in whatever terms and by whatever standards it may be formulated. If Pessimism springs from the experience of pain, it will deny the value of life because happiness is unattainable ; if from moral indignation, because goodness is unattainable ; if from æsthetic disgust, because beauty is unattainable ; if from scepticism, because knowledge is unattainable. But in each case the value of life will be denied. It makes no difference to Pessimism whether a man despair because the world is so miserable, or so bad, or so hideous, or so inscrutable.

It follows from this that Pessimism is essentially a certain definite attitude towards the great and well-recognized class of judgments which are known as judgments of Value (*Werturteile*). Now, judgments of Value are possible about everything that is experienced, and are contrasted with judgments of Fact in that they do not inquire what a thing *is*, but what it *is worth*. And, like the judgments of Fact, alike whether they are ethical, æsthetical, or merely emotional or affective, they are primarily relative,—*i.e.*, they assert that something has value for this purpose or that, for this aspect or that of

human nature. But just as the logical judgments must ultimately be accommodated in a coherent *system* of Truth, so the judgments of Value must ultimately all be referred to some supremely valuable end of action, or *Summum Bonum*. It will be possible then to estimate life as a Whole by this supreme standard of Value, and to discuss whether it satisfies it or not.

As the result of such discussion, only three alternatives seem thinkable :

I. We may conclude that Life is adequate to the attainment of the supreme end of action, and that, consequently, it has value and is worth living. That is the position taken by every form of Optimism.

II. We may decide that Life is inadequate to meet the requirements of the standard applied to it ; that, consequently, it has no value, and so is not worth living. That is the conclusion implied in every form of Pessimism.

III. We may object on principle to the attempt to answer the question, and contend that it should not be raised, arguing, *e.g.*, that it does not follow from the fact that the value of everything in life may be determined, that we can determine the value of life as a whole. That may be called the *agnostic* or—with a reference to the Kantian denial of metaphysics and its analogous answer to the ultimate question of knowledge—the *critical* answer.

It is worth pointing out that these three modes of treating the ultimate question of Value correspond exactly to the ultimate modes of answering the question as to the ultimate Fact. We answer the final problem of theoretic knowledge also in three ways : (1) We may declare that existence is ultimately knowable, and explain its nature in more or less tentative systems of constructive metaphysics. (2) We may deny that in the end anything can be known. That is the sceptical attitude. (3) We may protest that human knowledge is not competent to solve its ultimate problems, and has no right to raise the question. That is the attitude of a " Criticism " for which the ultimate metaphysical truth is shrouded in the unfathomable obscurity of the Thing-in-itself, and which, Tan-

talus-like, is yet forever tormented by the phantom of a satisfaction which it believes to be hopelessly beyond its reach.

Whichever kind of ultimate question, then, we raise, whether that of the nature of ultimate facts or that of their valuation, three alternatives seem possible. But we can hardly avoid asking further whether they are all equally tenable. That is a difficult question which I cannot here discuss exhaustively. The proper academic thing to do would be, I suppose, either to evade an answer altogether or to decide in favor of the third alternative,—which is nearly as unsatisfactory as no answer at all,—and to finish up with a learned sneer at those who venture on “dogmatic” conclusions. But, for once, I should like to dare to be dogmatic—at least to some extent—and to indicate some reasons for eliminating that third alternative.

For it seems to me that it reduces itself to the second, that “no answer” is equivalent to an answer in the negative. Nor can I see why, if judgments of Value are rightly and properly made, they should not be applicable to the scheme of things as a whole. Certainly we make this assumption in the case of the judgments of intellectual Value,—*i.e.*, in determining the value of our judgments of Fact. We assume that because judgments of relative truth and falsity are made, the former can ultimately be fitted into a coherent and congruous system of Truth. But if we are entitled to hold that there is Truth, and not merely judgments relatively true,—in other words, that the ideal of Truth is valid of Reality,—why should we not be equally entitled to affirm an equal validity for the ideals of Goodness and Happiness? If Experience as a whole can be judged true or false, coherent or incoherent, why should it not be judged as a whole good or bad? At all events, it cannot be taken for granted, without attempt at argument, that human judgments of good and bad mean nothing to the whole, while (equally human) judgments of true and false may be relied upon to extract its inmost mysteries.

And, moreover, the attempt to draw such a distinction would seem to break down even on the theoretic side. Granted that our theoretical account of the world had denied

to judgments of Value all ultimate significance, yet the fact would remain that such judgments were made and formed an integral part of life. They would remain, therefore, as an inexplicable factor in the world. And the more we realized the importance of this factor and the manner in which it permeates all our activities and directs even the intellect which is seeking to deny it, the more doubtful we should become whether we had explained anything while we left this unexplained. That is, we should inevitably be impelled towards scepticism on the theoretic side, and the practical reflex of scepticism is, as I have elsewhere shown, nothing else than Pessimism.*

It remains to ask whether the problems of Value or of Fact are more ultimate, and whether ultimately the one may not be subordinated to the other. I believe that they may and must, although once more I can only very briefly indicate the ground for this conclusion. I shall confine myself to observing that *ἡ διάνοια αὐτὴ οὐθὲν κινεῖ*, that the human mind is essentially purposive, that in its activity the judgments and ideals of Value supply the motive power to the judgments of Fact, and that, in the absence of anything valuable to be reached by them, no reason can be assigned why such judgments should be made. Hence, judgments of Fact, in spite of their apparent logical independence, seem psychologically to be rendered possible by and rest on judgments of Value, and the question, What is life worth? becomes the most ultimate of all. Thus, with respect to that question, Optimism and Pessimism seem to supply the sole alternatives; nor does it seem feasible still further to reduce their multiplicity to unity by alleging any formal ground for subordinating Pessimism to Optimism. For, as we have seen, the same ideals which, while they are regarded as attainable, confer Value upon existence, once they are despaired of, plunge us into irremediable Pessimism. The most that can be said is that just as in logical judgments negation results from the failure of an affirmation, just as scepticism springs from a painfully

* "Riddles of the Sphinx," ch. 3, 4.

achieved distrust of knowledge, so Pessimism is always *secondary*, and results from the breakdown of some optimistic scheme of Value. But even so it would seem to follow that Pessimism must be theoretically possible so long as such a scheme of Value can be felt to be inadequate and rejected; that is, so long as there persists a breach between the ideal and the actual.

What, then, is the practical conclusion to which the argument conducts us? It has vindicated for the question of Pessimism a position of paramount theoretic importance which would entail a far more serious treatment than is generally accorded to it in the teaching of philosophy. And in view of the vast accumulations of uncoordinated and uncorrelated knowledge which Philosophy has in these days to think over and digest, in order that mankind may not utterly lose its bearings in the cosmos, philosophers may well shrink from taking up the burden of a problem of such magnitude and difficulty as that of Pessimism. But even if Philosophy could renounce its task of giving a rational account of every phase of experience, I should yet hesitate to hold that its acceptance of this problem would be pure loss, or in the end would prove detrimental to its true interests. To assume responsibility is potentially to acquire power, and no question is better calculated than this of Pessimism to make Philosophy a power in human life, for none can bring it into closer contact with the actual problems of men's lives. And does not the whole history of its past show that Philosophy has never been more flourishing and influential than in periods when it has seemed to make some response to the outcry of the human soul to the question, What shall I do to be saved? If, then, Philosophy takes courage to do its duty, if it addresses itself to the question of the Value of Life and grapples with the Demon of Despair that besets the souls of so many, who shall say that there is not still in store for it a career of unexampled splendor among the forces that mould the destinies of mankind?

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